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Sita and Draupadi in Novels: Retelling of Epical Women Characters

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Abstract

The present paper entitled *Sita and Draupadi in Novels: Retelling of Epical Women Characters* describes the retelling of the myths and deals with the new illustrations of the epical characters Sita and Draupadi as authored in the two novels, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* (2013) by Devdutt Pattanaik. In earlier times, women were seen as passive receiver of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by males. There was thus an attempt to improve the woman rather than reform the social conditions which opposed them. Women's role is not recognized at many times. However, Sita and Draupadi have been portrayed as powerful characters in the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* While they seemed to be complying and dutiful at times, a deeper analysis into their lives. The difficulties that women face within their families are constant in any case of religion, caste or community and yet women continue to be ruled by a abundance of family laws which are illness to women. A woman in general, draws many shades of character. She is efficient of conveying the huge love and fondness of Sita, while also turning into an aggressive comeback seeking entity like Draupadi. Sita and Draupadi do exist in each subjugated woman. She goes through lots of mourning in her life; still she never bends herself in any circumstances. As societies at large is largely male oriented still a woman remains compliant in a society. She holds on her dignity and manages to struggle, achieving success and winning the respect and identification of all those around her. We need to listen to the voices of women from different cultural backgrounds that are calling for culturally located response. This paper will deal with the two stated novels to locate their positions as illustrated by the two authors.

Key words: *Indian Epics, Women, voices, identification*

Introduction: It has been a trend now to portray magnanimous mythical female characters and there are good stocks of books based on them which have been revamped and reintroduced to the readers of the current time with a fresh perspective. It is

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a fact that describing womanhood or woman in general have been one of the favourite subjects of many authors. The countless shades of a woman's psyche drive in flock of pens to paint their true or fanciful emotions to words. It is with the uprise of mythical writers in the India, a good number of them have started diving deep into the old scriptures and they have brought out the women we have either forgotten or kept far from frequent concerns of discourse. However, in spite of change in time and the evolution of the world, women have always been women.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the novel, *The Palace of Illusions,* traces the princess Panchali or Draupadi's life, right from her birth in fire and following her true spirited balancing act as a woman along with five husbands who have been ousted by cheating from their father's kingdom. Draupadi is swept into their quest to reclaim their lawful and birth right, remaining with them through years of exile and a terribly devastating war involving all the important kings of India. Meanwhile, as readers, we do not lose sight of her strategic duels with her mother-in-law, her devoutful faith and complicated friendship with the charismatic Krishna, or her classified attraction to the mysterious man who is the most dangerous enemy of her husbands.

In the novel, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayan*, Devdutt Pattanaik, the latest mythic sensation of India, brought a reverse to the gaze by telling the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. Pattanaik with his mythological expertise retells the *Ramayana*, drawing attention to the many of oral, visual and written retellings composed in different places, in different times, by different poets. He has tried to describe each one trying to solve the puzzle in its own unique way.

INTERPRETATION OF *THE PALACE OF ILLUSION*

The Palace of Illusions is an attempt by the author to take us back to a time that is on one way half-history, half-myth, and on the other way wholly magical; narrated by Draupadi or as called Panchali, the wife of the five Pandavas. The readers are given a woman's take on the timeless tale that is the great epic the *Mahabharata* tracing Draupadi's life--from fiery birth and lonely childhood, where her brother is her only companion; through a complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna; heading to marriage, motherhood and her unrevealed attraction to a mysterious man who is the most dangerous enemy of her husbands. As a mythological novel, *The Palace of Illusions* is a deeply human novel about a woman born into the world of men. This reflects the world of

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warriors, gods and the ever manipulating hands of fate. *Los Angeles Times* reviews it as, 'A mythic tale brimming with warriors, magic and treachery'. Divakaruni, with *The Palace of Illusions*, has proven that her storytelling talents put her right up there with the best authors of the time.

Draupadi was never the class who would easily pardon and forget. Of course, she also had a lot of forbearance, as she had put up with many deprivations while in the woodland. She had not emitted a word of objection when Kunti had inadvertently asked all her sons to share her companionship among them. At Yudhishthira's instruction, she had silently married all the brothers although this method of marriage was not at all frequent at her time. Devakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusion* rewrites it in the words, "But as always, whatever you brought should be shared equally amongst all my sons" (92).

Draupadi had worked as a humble maid for Queen Sudeshna of Virata during their time of Agyatavasa (living incognito). She also tolerated numerous offends form Dushasana, Duryodhana, Karna, Jayadratha and Kichaka. She kept herself concentrated on her loyalty to Krishna, knowing that he would come to her saves when the time came.

Draupadi went through terrible humiliation during the vastraharan episode. Even though she had no support from her otherwise valorous husbands when Dushasana brought her before the court and attempted to disrobe her, she had still accompanied them to the forest and spent the 13 years of exile with them.

She had also shown an eager feeling of intellectual and fast reasoning when she contradict that she had been disenfranchised in the game of dice. She had pointed out that Yudhisthir had no right to put her at strut, as he himself had no potential left and had himself become a bare toil.

Draupadi did pardon Ashwatthama for assassinating her five children, but only in the end, after she came to know the uselessness of war, and that it was going to be better for her to leave the past behind her. Other than this incident, one does not see her excuse any of her rivals. Draupadi's opposition against injustice give back Parvati or her Shakti facet. She also showed shadow of Kali. At other times, Draupadi was obedient and docile and waited to be saved from her aggressor, thereby revealing class of goddesses like

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Sachi and Usha. Sometimes, Draupadi was also the sketch of intelligence, in thumping her accurate identification and asking Bhima to murder the wicked Keechaka like Goddess Bharati would.

Draupadi was also icon of Goddess Shree or Wealth who was the wife to five Indras in their physical demonstration, that is, the five Pandavas. She was born many times for locking up the Indras. Her first birth was as Vedavati (the avatar of Swaha, Agni's wife) who damned Ravana. She then came again as Maya-Sita, especially to take reprisal from Ravana, while Agni conceal the actual Sita. The third birth was incomplete - she was both Damayanti and her daughter Nalayani. She married Sage Mudgala. Her fifth avatar was that of Draupadi herself. Hence, it could be said that Draupadi was a combined avatar of all the eight goddesses, namely, Kali, Parvati, Sachi, Shyamala, Usha, Bharati, Shree and Swaha. Unlike Sita who was found by Janaka accidently while ploughing the fields, Draupadi was not even the desired or demanded for daughter by Drupada. Drupada's invocation to Lord Shiva was for a son who could avenge his insult in the hands of Drona and the Kuru princess. Draupadi emerged from the fire of venegence along with her sibling Dhishtadyunna. There was a sense of immediacy in the way in which she was born. This sense of immediacy is described by Divakaruni in her book *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) where she has Dhai Ma describing the birth of Draupadi:

Even before we'd finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm. Coughing-from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari,
grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling.(4)

Right from the moment of her birth, when she emerges out of the flames of the sacrificial fire, the voices told her father, King Drupad, which is stated in *The Palace of Illusion* "take good care of her, for she will change the course of history." (Divakaruni, 5)

Despite being victimised, it is Draupadi who asserts herself, voicing her innermost anxiety and subdued rage in impassioned anger while her husbands display stoic endurance of their humiliation. It is she who is engulfed by the flames of revenge and anger in stark contrast to her stoic husbands. It is she who utters the dreadful and prophetic curse of the destructive battle which eventually brings about imminent apocalypse and retribution:

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> All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead.
>
> All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenceless woman. (Divakaruni 94)

The novel as a relevant piece to today's war-torn world puts forth the uselessness of hatred, war, selfishness and betrayal. As imagined from a woman's point of view it is a matter of courage in itself. Divakaruni with her beautiful writing style tones down the mystical elements to make it easier but engaging. This gives voice to woman concerns and the readers are told that a woman can give or sacrifice everything for the good of all others.

INTERPRETATION OF *SITA*: *AN ILLUSTRATED RETELLING OF RAMAYANA*

In *Sita*, Devdutt Pattanaik retells the *Ramayana*, with the motivations of the characters, and the workings of the human psyche, motivating the reader empathise and introspect. Pattanaik takes us swiftly through the twists and turns of the timeless tale that has evolved over thousands of years, and embellished by regional retellings. He puts forth his interpretation, from Valmiki's *Ramayana*, *Puranas,* to Sanskrit plays, versions of various Indian languages, in Buddhist and Jain traditions, and in south-east Asia.

Even people who don't relate themselves as feminist will run into the incitement that feminism is trying to solve so feminism is very much important in the 21st century. Feminism brings these types of differences to light and equipped solutions. Instead of struggling alone we can do better working together to solve these problems. In facing social, political, and economic challenges, women have a critical benefaction to make through feminism.

Sita nurtures hospitality and less of hostility with the associations that she builds in life with her quickness, intelligence and involvement in the household of Janaka. Sita and her sister Urmila never allow Janaka to feel the absence of a son.

Devdutt Pattanaik in the book *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) has justifiably illustrated the pride of Janaka as the father of daughters when he resists the continuous advice given by his court for not having sons as heirs to his throne and says:

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> The earth grants Janaka what he deserves. The fire grants Dashratha what he wants. I choose the destiny of daughters. He submits to the desire of sons. (Book One: Earth)

Though Sita was known to be light-mannered, she also had a potent side to her. In dissimilarity to her tiny shape, she had eminent intellectual power and reveals it throughout her life. Sita made some influential oration in the course of the banishment. The first time, she speaks to Rama, telling him bygone story about ahimsa or non-violence. This precedes Rama and he pledged her that he would never do away with anyone without utmost incitement.

The second time, Sita marked Ravana in outfit as the Brahmin cadging. She stares at him with doubt and tells him he does not at all peer like a Courteous. When Hanuman outstretches Lanka and meets Sita for the first time, he wants to see the Rama-Sita coalition instantly. He tells her that she could clamber onto his back and move with him to Rama. But Sita declined, saying she would never want to hasten away like a faint-hearted thief and that she would want Rama to beat Ravana and then come to call for her, like any bold Kshatriya (warrior) would.

Sita also pictures a lot of tolerance and endurance. She chivalrously asks Rama to forgive Ravana when the latter yield himself at the Lord's feet. Thus, Sita reveals traits of a strong woman and all the qualities true to her purpose. Every Indian woman has a segment of Sita in her - tender, though powerful; silent, though determined; a little variable, though also thoroughly pitying and merciful. After all, Indian women are all pile-up of the all-going through Bhoomidevi.

This book is an attempt to approach Ram by speculating on Sita: her childhood with her father, Janaka, who had great interest to host sages as mentioned in the Upanishads; her long stay in the forest with her husband, who had to practice celibacy while she was in the prime of her youth. The book also talks about Sita’s interactions with the women of Lanka, recipes she exchanged, and emotions they shared. Further, this also deals with Sita’s connection with the earth, her mother, the trees, and sisters. Her role as the Goddess, the untamed Kali as well as the demure Gauri, in transforming the stoic prince of Ayodhya into God is also a part of the storyline.

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RELEVANCE OF SITA AND DRAUPADI IN CURRENT TIMES

It can be acclaimed that in the two Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the respective heroines Sita and Draupadi are feminist icons with high morals and conduct, though different in their circumstances and character.

Sita as a young girl makes difficult choices as in leaving the palace with her husband for long fourteen years of exile. She shows her strength of character when abducted by the demon king Ravana in disguise, and stays strong and never succumbs to either fear or grief, with a sense of surity that Ram will free her. Acting as a single mother, when she is left in the forest to give birth to twin sons, she raises the twins providing them with the best education meant for the prince kids of Ayodhya. She carries out her convictions with immense courage and dignity.

Draupadi too as the wife of the five Pandavas, occupies a strange place and is considered an exceptionally strong woman and exemplary wife. She has full faith in her husbands and brings upon the great war of the *Mahabharata* for the sake of her honour, as she swears revenge for the disrobing, when she is stripped in an open court. Draupadi acts as the single force who takes the action to a bloody battlefield and that too for justice and righteousness. She wins but encounters losses— her five sons, her father and her two brothers in the war. Throughout her life, she suffers fury and humiliation, intense pain and grief, but her unmatched strength is in her final act, where she wholeheartedly forgives Ashwathama, the killer of her sons and her brothers, showcasing a wide range and scale of strong emotions and grace a woman is capable of. She rises high above all, constantly battling for her rights and prides till the very end that makes her exceptional.

The women who have captured the very essence of the true Indian woman were both Sita and Draupadi who were equally powerful women. Remarkably attractive and really ethical, they were also powerful and so strong that no tragedy could decline their inner atmosphere. Indian Hindu women worship them for their own salvation and it is no admiration that Indian Hindu women still hold them in the highest of regard.

Draupadi was born out of king Drupada's reprisal against his enemies. She showed this character throughout her life story. Her disrobing was what gives rise to the epic war of Kurukshetra. This disgraceful episode led to her the evil eye that a land that brings down its women to such extent of humiliation would never ever prosper.

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Indian mythology is special in that the mythological characters featuring herein lead very human lives and throw back the human feature of tenderness, bravery, fearlessness and goodness, as also dislike, retribution and ferocity. Indian mythology is full of stories of women and their tiny fight against the world they lived in, but each tale and each woman stands up above their position in society to show free will and bravery to stand up against unfairness. In the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, Sita and Draupadi are different in circumstances and character but very dissimilar in their own ways. But, they carry on shaping the modern Indian woman in unlike process. Sita and Draupadi were 'Srestha Naris', great women in their times. They were fairly powerful and finished up being two of the considerable women in Indian history. Premalatha S and Puja Gadhave state in the paper, *Voices Women in Mythology – An Analysis of Sita and Draupadi* published in Research Chronicler that:

> As the mythological character of Sita is presented in epic 'Ramayayana' is very passive, she is described as epitome of beauty and a daughter who obeys everything her parents and her husband tells her to do. But in the same way we don't celebrate Draupadi because she questioned her position and didn't bow down to the stereotypical notions of the system that is why she is not worshipped as Sita is and is considered as a hot-headed lady who tried to rise her voice (75).

In fact, both the women were hurt of inquiry and affliction, throughout their married lives. Their bearing ended only when their own life stories ended. They were also mostly misinterpret by other people during their lifetimes, but received adulation after the end of their life mission.

CONCLUSION

The Indian woman portrays many covers of character. She is competent of communicating the deep affection and fondness of Sita, while also exiting into an hostile, vengeance-seeking organization like Draupadi. Draupadi revealed her own tender and inner side when she excuses Ashwathama towards the end of the war. Sita, on the other hand, showed her hostile and resistant side when she chose to reject Rama and instead, return to her Mother, Bhoomidevi, at the end of her life mission.

Each Indian woman has a little bit of Sita and Draupadi in her. It doesn't bother what bearing or damage she has to go through in her life; she is able of crooking to her

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situation, eventually appearing conquering. Though she remains yielding in a society that is still largely manly, she carries on to fight and hold on to her nobility, attaining success and vanquishing the respect and recognition of all those around her. In the present time, things are only getting worse, what with global terrorism, agitation and conflict in almost all countries of the world. In such a circumstance, one would in all probability have to resort to serious estimate to check the surviving violence. Peaceful means may not automatically work for this specific time period. In this context, a woman would have to be more like Draupadi in order to live and survive a fruitful life.

The novels *Sita* and *The Palace of Illusions*, seek to provoke thought, to inspire, to expand one's mind and realise one's potential. The authors point out the fallacies of human nature and trace the faculties of human mind as well to give a sort of life-lesson through the mythological retellings.

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